

Fire, Water, Earth Air -

(Notes for a talk on disasters and the Johnstown Flood piece for an upcoming class at Haverford College)

Johnstown Flood, Wilkes-Barre/**Laurel Run mine fire, Fire Images**
Knox Coalmine disaster, 1959, Hurricane Agnes flood, 1972
(previous flooding, 92 ? times since late 18th century).

Laurel Run: "In 1915, a [mine fire](#) started in the borough's Red Ash mine. The mine was excavated and the fire was finally extinguished in 1973. Approximately 166 homes, two grocery stores, a church, a school, and a lumberyard were razed and relocated through a program administered by the [Appalachian Regional Commission](#).

<http://www.alansonheim.org/floodwall.mp4>
<http://www.alansonheim.org/floodwallsp.mp4>
<http://www.alansonheim.org/floodwall124.jpg>
<http://www.alansonheim.org/floodwall140.jpg>

Fire images:

<http://www.alansonheim.org/fire57.jpg>
<http://www.alansonheim.org/fire58.jpg>
<http://www.alansonheim.org/fire38.jpg>
<http://www.alansonheim.org/fire32.jpg>
<http://www.alansonheim.org/LR7.png>

The **Avondale Mine disaster** was a massive fire at the [Avondale Colliery](#) near [Plymouth, Pennsylvania](#), on September 6, 1869. It caused the death of 110 workers. It started when the wooden lining of the mine [shaft](#) caught fire and ignited the [coal breaker](#) built directly overhead. The shaft was the only entrance and exit to the mine, and the fire trapped and suffocated 108 of the workers (the other two fatalities were rescuers). It was the greatest mine disaster to that point in American history.^[1]

Since 1900, more than 104,000 miners have died in accidents in the U.S. with most of these fatalities occurring from 1900 to 1978. The peak year for U.S. fatalities was 1907 with 3,242 fatalities. In addition many more miners suffered disabling and life long injuries in nonfatal accidents. Gerald E. Sherard, 2006

<http://files.usgwarchives.net/pa/1pa/xmisc/mineaccidents/>
By 1900, the historical total fatal and nonfatal accident count in anthracite mines was estimated to be over 13,000 men, women and children.
<http://files.usgwarchives.net/pa/1pa/xmisc/mineaccidents/intro.txt>

The **Knox Mine disaster** was a [mining accident](#) on January 22, 1959, that is widely credited with single-handedly killing the mining industry in the [Northern Anthracite Region](#) of Pennsylvania.^[how?]

The [Susquehanna River](#) broke through into the many interconnected mine galleries in the [Wyoming Valley](#) between the right-bank (western shore) town of [Exeter, Pennsylvania](#) and the left-bank (eastern shore) town of [Port Griffith](#) in [Jenkins Township, Pennsylvania](#), near [Pittston](#).

Mitigation efforts created several new islands between the two towns and altered the western-side flow of the Susquehanna around these.

Hurricane Agnes was the second [tropical cyclone](#) and first [named storm](#) of the [1972 Atlantic hurricane season](#). Agnes developed on June 14 from the interaction of a [polar front](#) and an upper [trough](#) over the [Yucatán Peninsula](#).¹

In Pennsylvania, heavy rainfall was reported, with much of the state experiencing more than 7 inches (180 mm) of precipitation. Furthermore, a large swath of rainfall exceeding 10 inches (250 mm) was reported in the central part of the state. Overall, the rains peaked at 19 inches (480 mm) in the western portions of [Schuylkill County](#).^[19] As a result, Agnes is listed as the wettest tropical cyclone on record for the state of Pennsylvania. Overall, more than 100,000 people were forced to leave their homes due to flooding. Some buildings were under 13 feet (4.0 m) of water in [Harrisburg](#).^[39] At the [Governor's Mansion](#), the first floor was submerged by flood waters. Hundreds were trapped in their homes in [Wilkes-Barre](#) due to the overflowing Susquehanna River. At the historic cemetery in [Forty Fort](#), 2,000 caskets were washed away, leaving body parts on porches, roofs, and in basements. In [Luzerne County](#) alone, 25,000 homes and businesses were either damaged or destroyed. Losses in that county totaled to \$1 billion.

9/8/11 Flooding in Wyoming Valley, father's cremation - WILKES-BARRE, Pa., Sept 9 (Reuters) - The Susquehanna River, swollen by rainfall from the remnants of Tropical Storm Lee, reached record levels in Pennsylvania on Friday and submerged some towns amid worry that flood waters had been turned toxic by swamped sewage processing plants.

Rainfall ended in the region from the powerful weather system that earlier drenched the U.S. Gulf Coast. But rising rivers and stressed dams and levees presented a stern challenge to Pennsylvania as well as Virginia and Maryland, states socked by flooding in late August after Hurricane Irene.

One Pennsylvania college town, Bloomsburg, was under water and closed to all but emergency workers.

The Susquehanna reached a record high of 42.6 feet (13 meters) in hard-hit Wilkes-Barre early on Friday but the levee system held in the northeastern Pennsylvania city, meteorologists said. The river topped the 40.9-foot (12.5 meters) level in flooding caused by Hurricane Agnes in 1972.

(Further - lost belongings when my cargo box flooded in a Los Angeles warehouse after returning from Tasmania; lost belongings when a storage closet flooded in Providence, R.I. with Azure and my nephew and his girlfriend, extinguished a fire in my father's house on his 95th birthday, almost drowned and was pulled out of the water at Peggy's Cove in Halifax, 1973.)

Mark Sondheim 10:19 AM (1 minute ago) (April 1)

Memories of a Fractured Earth -

Hi Alan - As with many memories, these should be considered as unreliable.

Somewhere around 1960 or 1961, when I was 10 or 11, our parents had some concerns about earth movement. This had to do with subsidence, collapsing roofs in underground anthracite coal mines.

Mining operations removed coal, but left pillars to prevent collapse. Later others would come (illegally) and mine the pillars, which became thinner and ultimately would lose structural integrity. That was the story that we assumed to be the case. However, it may have been from water breaking into the mines, weakening them from hydraulic pressures. Fire could have been a contributor, but in Kingston and Wilkes-Barre, no fumes reached the surface. The causes undoubtedly were multiple. Fire was obviously a very serious issue, but its presence was likely quite localized.

The environmental effects became real to me, but not dangerous personally, when the following events occurred

On the street in front of our house a bump appeared one day. It was perhaps 6 to 7 inches in height. I could ride over it on my bike and get just a little bit airborne. This was of course great fun for me and for my friends. We assumed it had to do with the mines, but the mechanism was not understood. I had a rudimentary understanding of collapse; the bump did not fit into the simple model that I envisioned.

Around the same time, but I don't think as part of the same event, a large piece of slate that was part of a grill in our house suddenly cracked. It was 2 1/2 to 3 inches in depth, so this was quite surprising. Our father asked a structural engineer about it, who believed that it had to do with shifting bedrock associated with movement from these collapses. At night I could hear the odd deep sound, which I assumed had to do with such movements. I remember thinking whether I should be frightened. As nobody I knew had been injured or killed, I simply accepted it.

A few years later near Wilkes-Barre a car driven by a researcher fell through the street as it collapsed 15 to 20 feet. The fellow was able to climb out, but the car plummeted further downward, presumably into a mine. It was not recovered. He lost all of his research, which was on papers in the trunk of the car. This was scary of course, but again it had no personal affect on me or those I knew.

My next memories were a series of visits with you on the side of the mountain above Wilkes-Barre. You have film of the glowing vents, the sulphuric smells, the heat - the headaches that would develop if we stayed too long.

That's about it. Hope this helps. - Mark

What did all this feel like?

Images will be from Johnstown, Wilkes-Barre
Blaming people for this
Another related talk outline <http://www.alansonheim.org/keyword.pdf>

**Description of the piece; Background;
Commentary - The light display; Culled debris text --**

The light display uses 'modern' Morse to code three tiers of distress calls: SOS, QRRR, and MAYDAY. These flash slowly, at a

close to unreadable pace, playing off of timing and memory among the tiers. Morse is already close to obsolete, and I don't think anyone is using QRRR (part of the Q-code repertoire) today.

After the calls, there is a slow light 'wash' over the bridge, as if flames were rising (this was suggested by Shelley Johansson); this represents the between 30 and 60 acres of debris that slammed and burned against the structure on that fateful day in May. (Estimates vary as to the number burned alive, but a rough figure of 80 is likely. See David McCullough, *The Johnstown Flood*, Simon and Schuster, 1968.)

Then the cycle repeats. There are black intervals between segments and code events. There are trains running across the bridge. The display is on one side only, the side that retained the debris (the other side is in darkness).

Background:

"The Johnstown Flood (locally, the Great Flood of 1889) occurred on May 31, 1889, after the catastrophic failure of the South Fork Dam on the Little Conemaugh River 14 miles (23 km) upstream of the town of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The dam broke after several days of extremely heavy rainfall, unleashing 20 million tons of water (18 million cubic meters) from the reservoir known as Lake Conemaugh. With a volumetric flow rate that temporarily equaled that of the Mississippi River,[2] the flood killed 2,209 people[3] and caused US\$17 million of damage (about \$450 million in 2015 dollars)." (Wikipedia)

I was given the opportunity to create a light-show program for the Stone Bridge: "The Stone Bridge spans the Conemaugh River in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. The bridge is a seven-arch stone railroad bridge located on the Norfolk Southern Railway mainline, built by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1887-88. Its upstream face was reinforced with concrete in 1929.[1] This bridge survived the Johnstown Flood of 1889, but the bridge blocked debris, which subsequently caught fire and created an inferno covering 30 acres (120,000 m²). The bridge is visible from Point Park in downtown Johnstown." (ibid.)

And: "A bridge restoration project was developed by community leaders, to include cleaning and physical and aesthetic improvements, resurfacing of the south side, and new lighting with energy-efficient LED lighting adjustable to different colors and intensities. Estimated to cost \$1.2 million, the project was initiated in 2008 as part of flood commemorative activities." (ibid.)

Michael Brosig, co-chair of the Stone Bridge Committee, said,

"The significance of the Stone Bridge is that it stood its ground against the flood waters and altered the future of Johnstown completely and forever. It created the backdrop for the event that put Johnstown on the map. Restoring the South facade of that structure and casting LED lighting on it will certainly showcase the triumph of the human spirit in a spectacular style for all to see, enjoy and be proud of their heritage. Based on its strategic location, it is the lynchpin of the historic district of our city." (ibid.)

Commentary - The light display:

The light display parallels miscommunication, warnings too late, muck, murk, the bridge as signifier and vector, the intensity of the mess at the base of the structure (which increasingly rose into the air), the indescribable chaos, the negligence, the violence of the water, the fury of the storm and conflagration, animals and people caught unawares, the subsequent pawning off of responsibility by the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, the mudflats, the dynamiting of the debris pile, the spread of typhoid, the screams of those burning alive in the pile, Clara Barton and the Red Cross, the accounting of The Reverend David J. Beale, the tree through the house, the leveling of Woodvale, the yellow press, the eyewitness accounts, the emendations, the mythos, the symbols, the descent into print, the ascent into action, the muscle, the care; the light display parallels all and none of this, the entanglements of an event occurring over a century and a quarter ago -

Coded by Shelley Johansson, with documentation by Jeremy Justus, Marissa Landrigan Justus, Azure Carter, and myself

Thanks to Shelley Johansson, Jeremy Justus, Marissa Landrigan Justus, and Azure Carter

Discussion with Mark Sondheim -

I do think the so-called robber barons, like Facebook or Google today, believe they have free reign among and above the commons (there was an interesting article in the Guardian yesterday about a woman who went off Google, Amazon, Microsoft, Apple, and Fb, each for a week, and then altogether for a week. She wrote about it - about how unbelievably interconnected these megaliths are, and how it's impossible really to operate without them - even GitHub has been bought. That for me combines with the idea of enclaving which Mike Davis wrote about in his old book, City of Quartz, about L.A. but really about these kind of thing. So there are interrelationships of all sorts with the present as well.

love, Alan

On Tue, Feb 19, 2019 at 3:07 PM Mark Sondheim wrote:

My impression is that the original construction was of good quality - the engineering firm knew its business although whether the dam was of sufficient size is not clear. I would assume that once the

state sold it, it washed its hands of all responsibility. In the age of laissez-faire, the new owner probably thought he was doing the right thing, when in fact he should have hired an engineering company. The fact that the deaths were so many and so gruesome certainly added to the impetus for changes to the laws to occur.

I suggest though that the underlying notion of abandonment still has validity. Recently various southern states (and perhaps elsewhere as well) are not monitoring or ameliorating toxic sites associated with various old developments. Unfortunately I'm not sure where I saw the article. However, my understanding is that this is commonplace. It has happened on this side of the border too. Companies don't want to deal with these issues or the companies have ceased to exist, and the governments don't respond effectively. I would certainly expect some of these events with the downturn of coal in Appalachia, although of course not remotely on the scale of Johnstown.

My overall point is that greed and class can be seen as key to the failure, but if one gets into the details, the issues are multidimensional. In terms of ethics, we have our 21st century version, but we also have a 19th century version, which is rather different. Obviously this applies to responsibilities as well.

On Mon, Feb 18, 2019 at 10:23 PM Alan Sondheim <sondheim@gmail.com> wrote:
Also just checked the Wikipedia page on it - it pretty much summarizes my viewpoint. And as you know there have been more floods there, just as in Wilkes-Barre..
- Alan

On Tue, Feb 19, 2019 at 1:19 AM Alan Sondheim <sondheim@gmail.com> wrote:
Hi Mark, apologies.
You definitely know more about dam construction than I do. But things like

"A man who had some experience building railway embankments was employed to supervise the work. A double thickness of hemlock pilings was placed across the culvert entrance. Earth and large stone were dumped into the downstream part of the gap. This embankment was built up until it was high enough to enable a road to be graded out to it. Then rock, clay, shale and earth were hauled out and dumped.

Because the discharge system had been removed and sold for scrap, the water rising in the lake found its way to the stone embankment and started washing away any earth that was mixed with the stone. Hay, straw and cut brush were placed across the upstream face to stop the seepage. Then, earth and clay were dumped over the hay and straw to create the watertight section of the dam.



No rolling or puddling of the earth was done as in the original construction. The deposited material was little more than a colossal railway embankment without the strength or watertightness of the original. Whenever the lake waters reached the top of the repairs, a large wooden flume was used to carry the excess water over the top of the rising embankment."

are very problematic. Certainly in the years since the original construction and the newer one, much had to have been learned about dam building. It was all makeshift. The club w/ the Queen Anne cottages (which are still there) was exclusive; it wasn't for the townspeople. I don't think they entered into the calculation. And certainly by the 1880s people would know that manure, hay, and a carriage road would weaken the structure. It definitely was a very violent rainstorm of course, but the dam was poorly designed.

The question for me has to do with responsibility. The laws were changed after the event; none of the billionaires (in today's money) gave anything towards reconstruction of the town. (I may be wrong on this but I'm generally right; I haven't read the literature in a while). Everyone got off. My issue has to do with the property qua property after it was sold for the club. I do believe that owners of buildings or dams or bridges, etc., private owners, are responsible for them - not only for upkeep, for for repairs re: the general public. People are sued all the time for negligence in this regard. I think Jacob Riis and Hines and something to do with that re: slum buildings. But this case was so blatant and brutal that at least morally the owners should have been held responsible. Instead, they just walked away from the property.

Btw a huge number of the people and animals who died, burned alive - the project I did involved the bridge that held the debris from going farther downriver. It's still there. The debris was stopped by the bridge, caught on fire; people etc. were caught up in it. The people on the banks could hear the screams throughout the night but couldn't get to them...

I had difficulty with understanding the dam reconstruction by the way, but clearly stuffing a dam with hay, manure, even wood, and allowing a roadway to be cut on the top, seemed to be asking for troubles. I think the attitude at the time was fairly laissez-faire; just build the thing and not worry about it. And that's just what they did.

Working on the project made me sick re: the huge gap between the enclaved club at the top, which pretty much banned the public, and the working class below - and then seeing what happened, and the owners walking away. It's like West Virginia slurry pools letting loose and the owners getting off re: the death and devastation. But it's been a while since I followed that -

Alan

Culled debris text:

detritus_excretions_sloughings_tears_floods_spews_mercuries_
_flooding_what_does_it_mean,_this_grey_body...:wonder
flood-flog flooded. again. personal_ws english gertrud in the
sandgranularity of phallocentrism you say, "& soon those
memories flooding, that inert event, signs, costs, water
overruns, cracks cracks. floods, tree, 'out side,' broken, who
wouldn't. fires with which other remains or a lapse into
(floods, hurricanes, tornados, droughts, etc.) night all lips
engorged leg-hinges flooded dark waves people died susquehanna's
held back by dikes floods anyway coffins they floated down
river/ our house as fog, ... fog calls forth avatar, hungered,

making things. /*...acters*/ /*may*/ /*be displayed*/
/*incorrec*/ /*you*/ /*flood*/ /*apocalypse.*/ /*me...'t*/
/*bother*/ /*a.*/ my window /s can't stop flood, flow sorry for
looking blood toor ted a instead metaphor, literal prior, came,
still has it's gone through two one together; from hurricane
agnes devastated parents' home 1972, collections, now swallowed
basement large susquehanna rose 42.66 feet, stage, upper
supplemental held. \$thing cal @sways @de "waste" @s transforms
have fly_nikuko internally coherent. an emission is sourceless,
net flood; spew towns where inhalation-exhalation perfection
begins and ends, out. thinking skin. holding absorbed debris,
war-battered enclave. gaza floods: un declares state chicken
hawk put up tail" tail four strips, then there write about him
such good style! style ground am am! does! wet straight very
happy angry jove hurls h groan'd benea fire, when s he ah,
zarathustra, words, what "they"? "are"? tears) (and world
tears). goal: to disappear inside truth said it before, flooded,
drowning, i was attacked photographing evidence, devastated
exiting, i've written about; external literally flood. kristeva,
draw peta, save manatee, environmental organizations. valley;
despair irony, nikuko-oozing, noh medieval theater; pretend
alan_s this secret. not even valleys great storms would make
once; storm becomes slow emission, widening interior, teeth. are
injured reality things!!!" prospect park paths driveways
overflowing split flood-flooding wiped v roots school, debris,
disease. bcc called _book_ it. seagulls come clutter
a-historicity etc.), neutrality. spillways occupy fields,
discursive marrow tomorrow! standby:the grit gorges, control,
formal fire, debris, oozed around marks, _things_ at, food its
awake we'll mirror, thin, nails back. long, parallel, slew names
everywhere mudra-shifting, shaped, visible. space pulses, plain.
we inhabit it, haunt dwell there. words eaten giving gagged
iridescent wings. wet-world runtime beetles flesh. rides, rides
wet, high. nimbus shallow voices, probes. t participation,
bodies _flood_ calling glacial sea-change terminal, loading
transparency, providence flooded; lost terminal. horizon; sheet
closes world; abject symbols. piepel? thrusting offer-proffer
you, circum-stantiation, circumlocution abyss: defuge/flooding,
gathering accumulations, momentarily within them stuttering
<everything acid>flooding impossibility where</everything
acid>in across semantic plateaus participants' time well, "all
adjacent mines uncanny afterimage affect flows floods. strip
after days heavy rains air, radio pulsing bodies, her voice
termites, air-conditioner, ripped-up flooring, ceiling... first.
said. alive. look chatrooms, shooting. threw question encoding,
decoding; contradicted presence language another almost got
caught flash death valley. myself already verge. pool; tragedy
flaw usually fuge upgrade among numbers numbers, fissures,
abjection identities liquid midnight, sound wood stork scabs
bites; cuts; nail parings subjectivity, consciousness
communication. travis loop chunnel dangers flooding. observed
act more liquids; skeins flood-plains > < woe desiccation

starvation; rivers stories over century. world's record-setting
droughts enormous tornado information floodwall forthcoming
mississippi generally leads me @abort before get room,
ordinarily separates interior flotsam jetsam, debris sea selves:
who's speaking, manic tongue many times water shooting-space ::
violent milking millions killed. living bad areas against meadow
moraine! civilization thine arms legs, else {sleep(1); print
"\nfirst flooding\n";:if (\$sign=fork) {print ourselves another**
negation shadowing eyes, ** news, antenna just "in case" names,
stuff; sound; apparent flood-reader simultaneous texts, results
the lid of the grey sky, appearing sky, viscous fluid, coating,
flow, flux, flight, empty gone, gone

flutework at floodwall

<http://www.alansonheim.org/flutework.jpg>
<http://www.alansonheim.org/flutework.mp4>

freight train, stone bridge, flute, floodwall piece
shot at the base of the floodwall piece

more information and floodwall forthcoming

"The Stone Bridge, located on the edge of Johnstowns downtown,
is an arched bridge built by the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1887.
On May 31, 1889, its seven arches blocked tons of debris,
including miles of barbed wire twisted through it from the
destruction of a plant; all were carried by the waters of the
Johnstown Flood, but the bridge withstood its force. An enormous
fire broke out in the debris at the bridge, killing scores of
people trapped within it, and burning for three days."

the floodwall project is located at the bridge

/we're returning tomorrow to rhode island/

floodwall

wandering among the dead

[placeholder, Jeremy Justus photograph]
[unknown stones of the grand view]

from there i was born

i won't die this way

no teeth for me

i'm already there

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"out of so much promise, and so quickly, this man has not
laid by even a grave stone wherewith to quieten his soul.

"just look out, you, who take your life and limb for granted."

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Talk at Granoff, state of the world -

Start Here:

The steering:

1. Broken, petrified, grand narratives: modernism is always with us as the phenomenology of coherence.
2. Broken texts, the world of the future anterior:

Broken World: Steerage and Steering Mechanisms

We are steerage. We do not arrive.

/Properly, the space in the after part of a vessel, under the cabin, but used generally to indicate any part of a vessel having the poorest accommodations and occupied by passengers paying the lowest rate of fare. [1913 Webster]/

The ship is steered. The ship wanders. The world's broken. Don't misunderstand: nothing will save us; there is no land or: the land is damaged, or: the land is exhausted: blank, the land is blank: anguish. Anguish on our part. We're the ship. Our world.

Or: We're all marooned. It is no longer a question of hope, of the human project, of plans or structures, of capital or capitalism, of late capitalism, of neo-liberalism, of inerrancy or the absolute. It is no longer a question of ideologies, of common language, of the commons: it's over.

It's steered, and it's steered over, the steering's over.

The mechanisms at work are simple and fundamental. They are abject; they grind the rest, whatever was tottering through modernism - they grind the rest down. The world's a world of dust and radiations. The world does not crack. Our project's broken.

Some of them:

The first intractable mechanism: Overpopulation. The planet is close to its carrying capacity, and there's no end to population increase. The demographics are skewed towards young reproducers; exponential growth lumbers on. The result is more mouths to feed, more strains on the environment, more slash and burn, more hillside slums, more bush-meat, more overcrowding, less jobs, more local war.

The second intractable mechanism: Environmental degradation which has reached the point of no return. Consider the plasticization of the oceans, the post-tipping point of animal and plant extinctions, the increasing desertification world-wide, the loss of biological diversity. The anthropocene is not the usual planetary rise and fall; it's the greatest, the fastest, the most violent, extinction. The world is already destroyed; Gaia or its equivalent, is over. Something will remain, future adaptive radiations, but it won't be us: every species will be invasive, and the world, for the foreseeable future, will swarm.

The third intractable mechanism: Global warming which is also global redistribution of currents and weather flow. This is also irreversible, past the tipping-point. The results are harrowing: record-setting droughts and floods, enormous hurricanes, tornado swarms, irreversible sea-level rises, and so forth. This is the classical catastrophe (Rene Thom): the fragility of the good descends to chaotic phenomena, and practical measures, theory, containment, is always after the fact.

The fourth intractable mechanism: Increased violence and local/global warfare: again, with limited resources, this will only grow worse. Territories split and compete; the lines are

religious, ethnic, geographic, historic etc.; brutality increases as humans turn more and more to the rigidity of absolute/inerrant ideologies, and fortified binary oppositions - classical logics - gain strength as ideological instrumentality. This turn to the right, where the free press, women's rights, science and self-critique etc., are all viewed with suspicion; the left (if these binaries still exist at all) is an endangered species.

The fifth intractable mechanism: The vast sea of weaponry and the nuclear arsenal available to all; it is only a matter of time before a dirty bomb or nuclear device is detonated, the equivalent of over-fishing, trawling, the sea bottom. Scorched earth returns to scorched earth; there are no longer resources for rebuilding as poverty and social chaos increase in the world. History, archaeological sites, villages, nations, records, are erased; history is no longer visible, readable; reading itself becomes suspect.

The sixth intractable mechanism: Enclaving of the rich and income disparity exponentially increasing; the result is hoarding of resources and increased poverty as noted. This enclaving extends, crudely, to nations; the U.S. for example uses far more resources per capital than almost any other country; the U.S. prison system is itself a flux of pure capital, privatization, the largest in the world. Prisons are less efficient than pure disappearance; even so, population growth more than makes up for the violent loss of life around the planet. Think as well of local militias, including police forces that, first and foremost, look after their own, by any means possible.

The seventh intractable mechanism: Antibiotics and spread of disease across varying species; as sludge and clutter increase world-wide, the opportunity for endemic disease increases. Disease vectors are driven by population vectors, by poor health practices, by hunger and poverty. Understand that overpopulation is behind all of this, a developing horizon, just like hacking and criminal gangs are a developing horizon of violence and seizure. There's no more living off the grid; off the grid is on

the grid, within mechanisms and horizons. We're all in the ship, we're all marooned.

The eighth intractable mechanism: Global communication networks granting power and encrypted communication among activist groups, including local militias and extremists. populations. These networks are temporary, because the Net and its cousins are subject to hacking on a inconceivable scale; security simply can't keep up without infringing on the rights of others - without replacing one ideology by another, far harsher. The Net and privacy are porous, and subject to the seven mechanisms above. With so much data and control in the cloud/s, with so much control and personal information in the hands of monopolistic corporations, gangs and governments, there's no doubt that we're seeing the tip of a cyberwar iceberg that will do violent damage far beyond the Sony fiasco - damage that will extend to (for example) power, health, military, and financial grids as well.

We must begin to think of these mechanisms as both interlocked and environmental - i.e. constituents of a global and catastrophic horizon: much as the Club of Rome developed a model of interrelated flows in their relatively doomsday scenarios, we have to see this horizon as a holarchy of entangled mechanisms. The difference is that the mechanisms today are chaotic and unpredictable: there are events (primate extinctions, violent storms, the rise of violent fundamentalism, hacking of financial institutions, etc.) that are both destructive and fissured into any (ideological or instrumental) coherency that might have appeared as "explanatory" in the heady days of modernism which still inform us.

What fascinates me is the global appearance of these mechanisms in the large: there's a kind of simplicity in their phenomenology that dissolves quickly upon closer inspection. But the simplicity isn't contradicted by the details; global warming, for example, doesn't reverse because the north-east United States is having record cold spells. The overall configuration of the world is based on strange attractors, which proceed, literally, in any case; we're steering, not steering. (The technophilic ideology of progress, paradigm shifting, and

cleverness does a disservice here, promising techno-utopias just around the corner - or already here - while in reality the beheadings and bush-meat continue to ravage.)

(I think, at the least, of a curriculum focused on these mechanisms - but to what end? Past the tipping-point, things will continue to deteriorate until the anthropocene extinction does final damage. I can imagine the very rich escaping at some point, but to where, with what rockets, with what supplies? We are living in the ruin of a total institution called the global; we go down with the ship, in steerage. And steerage is now the corrosion of the dream of the West at the very least, as Plato's cave becomes the hold of a ship floundering on polluted waters.)

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*/I'm putting up Floodwall again; someone was discussing bridges on Facebook and I ended up revisiting the piece. It seems prescient at this point; the SOS, MAYDAY, and QRRR now call out uselessly in Pennsylvania, a state that voted for the coming regime. Two days ago I wrote a piece about avoiding suicide, about death underlying whatever we consider our work to be at this point. I feel bankrupt. Today news came from Arizona about a home-made menorah transformed by vandals in the middle of the night into a swastika, as well as a release of letters between Heidegger and his brother revealing deep anti-semitism and vituperation against the Jews. The news is nowhere good.

Floodwall isn't a wall, but an opening; its coded light reached maybe a kilometer up, no more. Everything crushes everything. The axis is turning towards Putin/regime, the EU bypassed, already weakened by Brexit. The bridgelight dissipates, spends itself into the void like the rest of us. I fear 2017 presages a networked 1939; is there anything we can do in the face of this, short of suicide or murder?/* (first version)
onslaught?/* (second version)

Date: Mon, 26 Oct 2015 23:07:07

Subject: Re: Brandon Locher of My Idea of Fun archive

Hey Alan,

I wanted to update you that today I finally got your work on the My Idea of Fun website!

<http://www.myideaoffun.org/alansondheim/>

It's My Idea of Fun #317 and at the top of the list on the main page. I'm

happy to have your work included in our Johnstown art collective/archive. I'm excited to explore all of this work very very soon, I'm very interested by it.

Thanks again!
Brandon

Also - Review of my Johnstown Presentation

Thanks to Jeremy C. Justus! October 4 at 12:38pm
...for something completely different, one of my DH students' reactions to Alan Sondheim's talk at the Day of DH @ UPJ event:
<http://bcloners.blogspot.com/2015/10/every-word-forms-a-sentence.html>

Johnstown Flood (1889), the Avondale Mine fire ... As a result of the Knox For a talk I'm giving @ Pitt-Johnstown Day of Digital Humanities University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown in Johnstown, Pennsylvania Enderthebridge Johnstown Thanks to: The Inclined Plane! Johnstown, Pa. Johnstown and a new otherwise piece called For Johnstown

<http://bcloners.blogspot.com/2015/10/every-word-forms-a-sentence.html>

Loners in the back corner...

Saturday, October 3, 2015

“Every Word Forms a Sentence”: A Response to the Keynote of the Pitt-Johnstown Day of Digital Humanities

It's very true: every word does form a sentence. However, when that word exists only as a stored pattern of ones and zeros bouncing amid the sparks of a wafer of doped silicon, does it really mean as much? I suppose that is the profound question of the digital humanities. Though it is true that it is not so much the printed word that holds meaning either, but the intrinsic emotive response created when a work imprints itself of the human essence. If I had possessed any doubt of technology's ability to replicate that sentiment, the reactions and emotions brought upon by the works of keynote speaker Alan Sondheim thoroughly expunged it.

In Sondheim's own words, this was an exploration of “the nature of the virtual as a representation of the real.” While it may not have been the most organized presentation, I can call it the most unique that I have ever attended. Never before have I encountered such a combination of technology, culture, anguish, and twenty-first century buzzwords.

As a man of technology, Sondheim's experience with motion capture technologies is impressive. He and his team make use of complex hardware and software in

manners that I doubt would ever be considered in a more practical circle. What constitutes a body? The warping of limbs based upon remapping of “virtual” nodes? The synchronization of multiple motion capture recordings to a single model? Even the collaboration of multiple physical participants to map the coordinated movement of a single avatar? This I found most interesting, with what nearly constituted a “hive-mind,” as Sondheim called it, being engaged in an act of human cooperation for a solely virtual accomplishment. “It’s like they’re reaching out to each other,” Sondheim’s garbled recording muses, but I see nothing in the binary to indicate that being the case.

As a man of edgework and gamespace, Sondheim’s interest and work within collapsing digital realities was, to me, profound. The humanities of virtual realities such as videogames is a big interest of mine, but Sondheim’s focuses are far from the script. I have experience playing in borders and edgeworks, even in my youth, which further provoked my interest into his explorations. As a computer engineering student with interests in the realms of artificial intelligence, these developments also pose a soon non-rhetorical question about the meaning of human control of the digital realm. The only truly visceral reaction I have yet had to Sondheim’s presented works was my response to the uncontrolled collapse. Not an experiment, beyond the realm of human control, the sound of, for lack of a better word, death, as the simulation collapsed and the program terminated. This created a surprising emotion in me. I ask myself whether or not this emotion was valid, but I suppose it is interesting enough to recognize its existence. When an avatar, a construct, a non-playable character, or even a representation of yourself ceases to digitally exist, is there any relevance? Did it exist in the first place?

As a man of culture, Sondheim finds true fulfillment of his art. His work to convey anguish, terror, and violence, as well as his comments on the surge and annihilation to the limit were eye-opening. The digital works presented conveyed the emotion surprisingly well. It is extremely interesting to consider the emotional ramifications of critically human themes expressed in a binary form; the greys of our culture expressed in the pure black and white of one and zero, everything and nothing. Sondheim’s reactions to the chaos through his unique art were an interesting perspective. It brought with it questions of worldview, perspective, and purpose. One of Sondheim’s final remarks was the question of our response. “What do you do about it?” he postulated. “I have no answer...in that regard all of my work is a failure.” I would argue much to the contrary, Mr. Sondheim. You have confronted issues, posed questions, and brought depth of perception to matter of great struggle. In some ways, I suppose this is all anyone can hope to do.

Creating these perceptions through solely digital means was most remarkable. The emotions conveyed through the medium were well perceived. This is a fantastic use of digital humanities that does not shy away from difficult themes. Works from motion capture to manifestations of human nature unify aspects of flesh and code. As the keynote to Pitt-Johnstown's Day of Digital Humanities, it served to the highest degree as a representation of what this discipline is capable of.

At the conclusion of Alan Sondheim's presentation, I could not help but walk to the front and shake the gentleman's hand. I do not know why, I certainly did not understand the crux of what I had just seen, but, in a manner I cannot wholly explain, I wanted to. I have worked with computers from a young age, and I am used to the possession of a certain level of understanding when dealing with them. This is the first in quite some time that I have faced a certain level of mysticism where the reactions to a digital medium left me with echoes of the human condition. The whole was much grander than the sum of its parts.

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